DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 574 CG 023 567

AUTHOR McKenzie, Cathy
TITLE Theoretical Orientation.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Modification; Cognitive Restructuring; Counseling Techniques; *Counseling Theories; *Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *Group Counseling; Nondirective Counseling; *School Counseling

ABSTRACT

Today, counseling in an elementary school setting is both exciting and extremely challenging. Never before has there been such a high need for counselors to work with such a young and large portion of the population. The Person-Centered Approach to groups in the school setting works well in counseling because of the high level of empathy and understanding necessary for the healing climate of the group to occur. The value of this approach seems to be especially applicable to the first two stages of group therapy. During the third stage, however, a more cognitive-behavioral approach seems to enhance the work being done. In the final stage, a mixture of both approaches works well. One of the reasons the Person-Centered Approach works so well with elementary-level students is the inclusion of the issue of trust. Students will establish acceptance and trust in the leader, or the group, and then in themselves. Probably the most powerful experience for those in the group is being understood and accepted by others who are also involved in revealing their feelings to one another. The Person-Centered Approach and the Cognitive-Behavioral Approach can be linked together to work very effectively with children in the elementary school setting. (A case example of David, a sixth-grader who was doing poorly in school and was referred for group counseling is included.) (ABL)

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Theoretical Orientation

Cathy McKenzie

Group Counseling

North Dakota State University

Summer Session II, 1991

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Theoretical Orientation

Today, counseling in an elementary school setting is both exciting and extremely challenging. Never before has there been such a high need for counselors to work with such a young and large portion of our population. Because this young population has such diverse needs and inexperience in dealing with life changes and stresses, the role of the elementary school counselor has become an important necessity in the school and community.

The Person-Centered Approach to groups in the school setting works well because of the high level of empathy and understanding necessary for the healing climate of the group to occur. This seems to be especially applicable to the first two stages of group therapy. During the third stage, however, a more cognitive-behavioral approach seems to enhance the work being done. In the final stage, a mixture of both approaches works well. It is the intent of this paper to explore how these approaches worked together for David, a member of a group of sixth graders in an elementary school.

One reason the Person-Centered Approach works so well with elementary-level students is the issue of trust. Students will establish acceptance and trust in the leader, or the group, and then in themselves. This might be after the group has demonstrated a previous trust in them. Probably the most powerful experience for those in the group is being understood and accepted

by others who are also involved in revealing their feelings to one another. This empowers the individual. When the individual is empowered, change can occur.

According to Rogers (Corey, 1990), the three primary attitudes of genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathy, must be present inn order for people to experience their own source of power and self direction. In the first stages of group, the leader must demonstrate and model these characteristics in order to establish that they (leaders) are real or genuine. Because it is important for a group member to feel secure and risk sharing, the sense of trust in a group must be given its proper attention. Students can spot a fake attitude with what seems to be their natural radar. So, in leading a group it is important to establish the trust early and demonstrate active and sensitive listening. The children in the group need to know that their leader actually lives and practices what he or she preaches.

Alicia Hill-Hain, in a dialogue with Carl Rogers, lists the group challenge as "the search for the healing ground" (Hill-Hain & Rogers, 1988). The purpose for groups in an elementary school would be to provide the opportunity for a child to be exposed to that healing ground, and once exposed, feel empowered enough to take advantage of it for change.

The cross-over between the Person-Centered Approach and the Cognitive-Behavioral Approach is more of a building block-type

experience. Once the group members have felt the unconditional positive regard and empathy from the group, they feel secure enough in themselves to risk behavior changes. Often these behavior changes are practiced through role playing in the group prior to the actual event. So, with the encouragement and support of their group members, these students can attempt to change their behavior in school or at home. They keep a record of their successes and failures, and share these with the group if they so desire. It is always amazing to watch their belief in themselves increase based on the love and support and belief the group had in them. It is a cause-and-effect relationship at this point.

In school, behavior difficulties are often a direct result of high anxiety for a variety of reasons. One aspect of the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy that can be used here is the Anxiety Management Training (AMT). It focuses on the use of one's own internal anxiety systems as cues--making it highly transferable and usable in prevention and self-control (Huebner, 1988).

With the cognitive-behavioral aspect of this, it is important to keep records and have a system of rewards. This way, the group members can actually see that they are changing the behavior that they targeted as nonproductive and learn new ones to replace them. So, during the working stage, the individual targets exact behaviors and plans the procedures for change. They plan what they will do when a certain situation arises (e.g., what will

David do when someone calls him a name on the playground at noon?). Now David has the power and confidence to choose another behavior that will not land him in the principal's office. If he still chooses destructive behavior, he needs to know that he also chooses the consequences.

Case Example

This is a brief summary of an experience shared in a group with David. David was doing poorly in school for what appeared to be no reason. He acted as though he just did not care about his grades and his behavior. At the request of his teacher and parents, David was sent to the counselor and became part of a group of eight sixth graders.

The first few sessions were spent in learning group rules and establishing trust in each other. Areas of trust were explored and leaders soon emerged. David was not one of these. In fact, he held back and said nothing until directly spoken to. After watching and listening to nearly all the others in the group tell about their families, David finally opened up. He did so only after hearing another in the group share about their father's drinking. The key seemed to be when the father had called his son "stupid." This formed a very strong bond between David and the group. Also, it was the basis of feeling accepted as one of the group. From this stance, David and the group looked at how they felt when this name calling happened. They admitted that they

liked the attention from their fathers, even though they could see that it was not "happy" attention. They decided it was better than nothing because of the love they felt toward their fathers. David was often berated at home, and that was the only kind of attention he received from his dad.

One source of irritation to his father that precipitated a lot of the negative attention was his poor grades. So, David's gain on this situation was attention. To him, the gain outweighed the poor behavior (i.e., not getting his homework done). As a result, he was avoiding school work to get attention from his father.

The behavioral contract that David designed for himself was simply that he would complete his homework assignments nightly and receive computer time during the school day as a weekly reward. He was responsible for record keeping and reporting to the group. At first rewards were weekly; then the time frame lengthened so as to stress the importance of the behavior change instead of the reward. David's grades improved, and so did his self-esteem. He became aware of the differences between positive and negative attention, and began to seek out the more positive ways with his father. Through the group, he had learned how to empower himself.

At this writing, David's problems are not all solved, but he has experienced success in the area of homework and improving his grades in school. This, then, becomes a confidence builder on

which other successes can grow. This is the point where the two theories converge. David acquired new behavioral skills and a new knowledge base of his own feelings, as well as an appreciation of empathy for others.

Summary

The case example of David was used to demonstrate this point: First, he needed the acceptance and genuine caring of a Person-Centered type group to feel good about himself before he dared risk any kind of behavior change. Once empowered, his self-confidence grew, and he became willing, almost eager to attempt to change. Obviously, there are many issues to address in a case like this. The grades issue, however, was the one in which David could take control of himself immediately.

This author truly believes that the Person-Centered Approach and the Cognitive-Behavioral Approach can be linked together to work very effectively with children in the elementary school setting. David found his "healing ground" and was then able to change his behavior. Previously, he was unable to concentrate on the behaviors until his love and acceptance needs were met.

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